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SUBJECT: SERBS REWRITE HISTORY: MEDIA CAMPAIGN GEARS UP AS NATO
BOMBING ANNIVERSARY APPROACHES

Summary

1. (SBU) March 24th will mark the tenth anniversary of the start of the NATO bombing campaign against the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. With two articles published in widely-read dailies on January 15, the Serbian media continues with its "Serbs as victims" theme, casting the Albanians as the aggressors and NATO as aiding and abetting them. This revision of history in advance of the anniversary and the first hearings before the International Court of Justice on Serbia's case challenging the legality of Kosovo's independence will only accelerate in coming weeks. End Summary.

Albanian Atrocities in June 1999

2. (SBU) On January 15, Belgrade daily Vecernje Novosti published an article entitled "Albanians Killed, NATO Covered Up," which alleged that Albanians committed war crimes, including ethnic cleansing, after NATO forces entered Kosovo in June 1999. The article was based on a December 18 article in the Italian weekly magazine Panorama, titled "The Hidden Truth: Massacres of Serbs," which makes no mention of a NATO role in a cover-up, according to the Italian Embassy. The Panorama article did quote (retired) Italian General Mauro del Vecchio, in command of an Italian KFOR brigade posted in Kosovo in 1999, and Peruvian diplomat Pablo Jose Baraibar, who headed the UNMIK Missing Persons office, and also included pictures reportedly taken by Italian soldiers, which allegedly show bodies of Serbian civilians. (Comment: Serb media has a history of showing photographs of victims and claiming them as Serbs. While the international press was showing the horrors of Serb-run Omarska Prison Camp during the war in Bosnia, for example, Serb media used the same images claiming the detainees were Serbs. End Comment.)

3. (U) The Vecernje Novosti article, which reprinted two of the Panorama pictures, reported that del Vecchio, currently an opposition politician in the Italian parliament, stated that during his first 20 days in Kosovo he received daily reports of Serb and Roma corpses left along the roads and that "the smell of death was omnipresent." He also is quoted as saying that Albanians burned Serb houses and destroyed Serb churches and monasteries.

4. (U) Baraibar in turn talked about an investigation that he carried out in 2005 into the July 1998 kidnapping of Serb civilians near Orahovac. Citing a female survivor of the kidnapping, he implicated current Kosovo Assembly chairman Jakup Krasniqi, a Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) officer at the time, and former Kosovo Prime Minister Agim Ceku in the crimes. Baribar further claimed that neither the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) nor the Kosovo judicial system was interested in the evidence that he collected.

Racak False Pretense for Bombing

15. (U) In its January 15 article, the daily Politika focused on events that occurred 10 years earlier in the southwestern Kosovo village of Racak when bodies of Albanians, whom the Serbs insisted were KLA members, not civilians, were found. The article argued that efforts to soften the court of public opinion for the NATO bombing began that day when then-OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission head William Walker characterized the deaths as a "massacre" in the presence of foreign and Albanian journalists.

16. (U) Declaring that the past ten years have proven that Walker's conclusions are far from indisputable, the article heavily cited statements made by Finnish forensic dentist Helena Ranta in her autobiography in 2008 and in a Russian documentary film. In these statements, Ranta alleged that Walker and Finnish Foreign Ministry officials pressured her to conclude as she told the media in 1999 that Racak was a "crime against humanity." In the film, she reportedly stated that the bodies discovered in Racak were "terrorists, Serb soldiers, and local inhabitants."

Comment

17. (SBU) As the March anniversary of the 1999 NATO bombing campaign approaches and with initial briefs due before the ICJ in April, we can expect the Serbian media to continue to distort the NATO intervention and its casus belli. Contacts close to the government have told us that the MFA is pushing this effort along. Though the intent is mostly for domestic consumption, comments of

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"internationals" such as del Vecchio, Baraibar, and Ranta lend credibility to Serbia's growing argument that Serb actions in Kosovo were self-defense and that the NATO bombing further victimized Serbs. End Comment.

MUNTER